**My Children My Africa**

**Character Analysis**

Mr. M (Anela Myalatya): Mr. M is a 57 year-old black teacher at Zolile High School. As a bachelor, Mr. M lives in the small back room of the local reverend’s house. He lives a very simple life that revolves around intellect and education; his greatest hope is to keep young people at their desks. Mr. M is also a Confucian (one of the few that are black); he adores the words of Confucius, from which he builds his classroom motto.

Isabel Dyson: Isabel Dyson is a white girl that visits Zolile High School in Brakwater during an interschool debate. She is the “outsider that was being asked to prove herself.” Stepping up to the challenge, Isabel becomes very comfortable and becomes very involved in debate in Brakwater. A very witty and intelligent young woman, Isabel comes to face reality of South Africa through her connections to Thami and Mr. M.

Thami Mbikwana: Thami is a black boy who attends Zolile High School who has been a student of Mr. M for a very long time. Thami shows extraordinary promise and is a very smart student. Affected by the long-standing apartheid in South Africa, Thami contemplates and debates his future throughout the play. The focal point of the play and slightly idealized by the other two characters, Thami’s words and decisions have a large effect on the way that the play unfolds.

Mr M as a Confucian: K’ung Ch’iu, or Confucius, was born in 551 B.C in the small Chinese town of Tsou during the Chou dynasty (c. 1100-221 B.C.). Ruling over such a vast amount of land became difficult, however, and the country broke up into individual states and made [feudalism](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=define%3A+feudalism&btnG=Google+Search) an idea of the past. Rulers of the new states were educated but corrupt aristocrats who used war as a means to gain the spoils and pleasures they wanted. The aristocrats ignored the suffering of the poverty-stricken people, which caused extreme social differences between the classes. The people were struggling under the new form of government, and they wanted a new direction and purpose in their lives.
Confucius grew up during this transfer of power. While he was a descendant from an aristocrat, Confucius grew up in an impoverished family, and viewed the world with a "practical perspective". Confucius was three when his father died, and his mother had to take on multiple jobs in order to support the family. By the time has was 15, he had decided to devote himself to education while working various jobs such as a book-keeper, shepherd, cowherd, and clerk. He began traveling to different parts of the country, giving advice to the different leaders. During this time he developed a group of followers. His teachings include righteousness, honesty, trust, love within a family, and loyalty to the state. These beliefs became known as Confucianism, and is now followed and sometimes recognized as a Religion.
In "My Children! My Africa!" Mr. M says that Confucius is his teacher. Indeed, Mr. M and Confucius share many key ideas. They both believe very strongly in the power of education, and the importance of morality as a part of the government. Mr. M tries to use education to show the children how they are being supressed by the government.

Analysis of Text: Shelly’s “Ozymandias” and opposing views of revolution

*“I met a traveller from an antique land
who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
`My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”*
-Percy Bysshe Shelley

Shelley’s “Ozymandias” is placed in Fugard’s play as a catalyst to spark the discussion of two opposing philosophies of rebellion. The poem itself is meant to highlight the ephemeral nature of tyranny, and show that even those people who live their lives to cruelly control and impact those of others are forgotten in time. Only the things that cannot be influenced by human hands are eternal. However, the impact that it has on the two children who recite it and their teacher is entirely subjective. Thami’s first question is regarding the manner in which this cruel king was deposed, and how his statue fell. When Isabel responds that she believes his ruin is the effect of time, and not due to any active revolution on the part of his people, Thami still wishes to believe that he was brought down by violent means, seeing a correlation between the statue of Ozymandias and some statues in his own country that could be brought down. Yet Mr. M is insistent that the most effective way to triumph over tyranny is to work constructively, and to build statues of one’s own. This conflict between the violent revolutionary and those who choose more peaceful means and try to revolt within the system is seen not only throughout this play, but also as a common theme in much of African literature. Mr. M believes this as well, and in his efforts to bring Isabel and Thami together is attempting to conquer hatred through cooperation. It is this “old-fashioned” ideal that eventually leads to his death, for he is so sure that violence is the wrong course he would rather side with the white oppressors than support such a brutal insurrection. Thami, on the other hand, in his comparatively shorter life, cannot believe that this sort of prolonged and silent uprising can have any effect. If the Ozymandias’ are allowed to survive they will continue to subjugate those they believe inferior regardless of any proof of equality, therefore there is no path to freedom that does not fully defeat those who have defeated the Africans for so many years. The sort of social change that Mr. M champions can have no immediate effect, and its seemingly submissive nature is infuriating to the mutinous rebels. This fundamental difference in philosophies of freedom is exemplified in the different meanings Mr. M and Thami take out of Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” and it is this divergence of views that leads them down very different paths with nearly opposing ends.

The character whose viewpoint most of the audience is likely to share is that of Mr M, and it is also the one who commits an unforgivable act, resulting in terrible grief and loss. And his opponent, while espousing armed struggle for a cause with a totalitarian streak, not only forgives the unforgivable act but tries to save the perpetrator's life. Human beings, Fugard knows, are more than their political views.

The time is 1984, the beginning of the end of South Africa's centuries of colonial agony. It will take five years of brutal violence and five more of bitter contention before the nation moves on to its new, post-colonial agony. South Africa's children will not have a happy time of it. Fugard's hero, an inexact word, is a township high school teacher, an aging bachelor who has given his life to his classroom. What children learn and how well they learn it are his only concerns. His neighbours never call him anything except "Teacher" or "Mr. M." A black man who has never travelled physically beyond the area where he resides, he voyages by means of books; his role model in life is Confucius.

Mr. M has wickedly violated his Confucian objectivity, he confesses, by having a favourite pupil, Thami. From Thami's intelligence and eagerness to learn, Mr. M hopes to mould one of the educated professional men whom he sees as the future saviours of South Africa, employing their brains, and the moral integrity he strives to instil in his pupils, to subvert and ultimately to transform its unjust social order. Thami's articulateness and his brilliance as a debater supply Mr. M with a first step in the subversive process: Under pressure from world opinion, some of the superficial restraints of the apartheid system have been loosened slightly, enabling Mr. M to invite Isabel, a student from a nearby all-white girls' school, to debate Thami on the seemingly innocuous subject of equality for women. Thami takes the negative side, and Isabel wins the debate.

Encouraged by the debate's success, Mr. M pushes further. A statewide quiz contest in English literature has been announced, with a large cash prize, and he arranges for the two high schools to field a joint team, consisting of Thami and Isabel. Much cramming and coaching is needed. Amid the welter of authors' biographies and passages from famous poems that follows, we watch Isabel's respect and admiration for Mr. M increasing, as well as the burgeoning friendship between her and Thami.

The competition, with the team's expected win, never comes off. What happens instead is history, agony, and (offstage) violence, in the course of which Mr. M and Thami become irrevocable opponents, their enmity destroying one and sending the other into exile, while Isabel becomes an increasingly perplexed and helpless onlooker. The last scene belongs to the children, but the children do not belong to each other, and with the history of the decade after 1984 still to come there is not yet a South Africa for them to belong to. The traumas of history have made a situation in which, because all are exiles, anyone may do the horrifically bad or the heroically good thing: Its politics have become too chaotic to explain people's choices.

The setting of My children! My Africa! is a classroom at Zolile High School in an Eastern Cape black township which reflects the teaching and learning nature of the play. The play opens with a debate between Thami Mbikwana, black student at the black township school and Isabel Dyson, white student from the town’s all white Camdeboo Girls High School. It sounds that it will be the new picture of South Africa where black and white contends each other and debate after years of human and cultural segregation. Theirs is no combat of physical aggression and violence but a reasoned verbal contention, a real example for life-like political negotiation. For Fugard, there is no one better than Thami and Isabel to practice racial reconciliation, members of the new generation, who will likely to be called upon to argue vital issues and forge a South African life after dismantling the shackles of apartheid.

My children! My Africa! decries the liabilities of the old pedagogical order and curriculum. It tackles the dilemma of South Africa’s colonized black teachers who accepted the country’s racialism and sought empowerment for the black through mastery of the white. It reflects the ambivalence in postcolonial societies like South Africa about the Western cultural legacy that shaped the colonial past and continues to play an important role in shaping their postcolonial future. Thami and Isabel prepare themselves for the English literature contest by testing each other in the area of nineteenth –century English poetry. Such contest is abundant with poignant references to the grim realities of Apartheid South Africa. Shelly’s Ozymandias becomes an ironic commentary on the ultimate doom of the white apartheid regime’s policy when read in a South African context. It is important to allude here to the historical fact that

Ozymandias’s oppressive rule left Egypt impoverished and suffering from an incurable decline. Ozymandias’s memory is recalled home by Thami,

Thami : *I had a book of Bible stories when I was small, and there was a picture in it showing the building of the pyramids by the slaves .Thousands of them, like ants, pulling the big blocks of stone with ropes, being guarded by soldiers with whips and spears .According to the picture the slaves must have easily outnumbered the soldiers one hundred to one....*

Isabel*: What are you up to, Mbikwana? Trying to stir up a little social unrest in the time*

*of the pharaohs, are you?*

Thami : *Dont joke about it, Miss Dyson. There are quite a few Ozymandiases in this country waiting to be toppled. And with any luck you will live to see it happen. We won’t leave it to Time to bring them down.*

South African society is a racial pyramid: the white Afrikaners minority at the top and the African at the bottom. John McLeod argues that “the teaching of English literature in the colonies must be understood as part of the many ways in which Western colonial powers such as Britain asserted their cultural and moral superiority while at the same time devaluing indigenous cultural products”. (2000:140). This may account for Thami’s defection from the Eurocentric colonizing culture of Mr. M whose teaching valorises and glorifies. Thami’s rebellion is manifested in his lucid comments on the colonial education fostered by the whites, an education that seeks to erase black culture and history by replacing them with beautified white versions. Thami lashes out against the educational program of Uncle Dave, the regional Inspector of Bantu schools. Education which Uncle Dave and his colleagues foster is essentially the one that nurtures an image of the European world by claiming that Europe was the centre of the universe and Africa was discovered by Europe. Africa was also an extension of Europe, represented and defined by white Eurocentric culture.

In regard to colonial education, Thami addresses the audience powerfully,

*Do you understand now why it is not as easy as it used to be to sit behind that desk and learn only what Oom Dawie has decided I must know? My head is rebellious. It refuses now to remember when the Dutch landed, and the Huguenots landed, and the British landed. It has already forgotten when the old Union became the proud young republic. But it doesn’t know what happened in Kliptown in 1955, in Sharpeville on 21st March 1960, and in Soweto on the 16th of June ,1976. Do you? Better find out because those are dates your children will have to learn one day. We don’t need the Zolile class-rooms anymore. We know what they really are....traps which have been carefully set to catch our minds, our souls.*

Thami’s rebellion is a protest against the colonial educational policy which is meant to colonize the minds of the African people. It can also be seen as one of the ceaseless struggles of African people to liberate politics, culture and their economy from Eurocentric stronghold to usher a new era of self –determination.

Mr. M seems to be a victim of the colonial educational policy to alienate educated blacks from their native history and traditions. Mr. M informs the official authorities about the rebellious political activities of his students and is consequently murdered by the very students whose intellectual lives he sought to nurture. One tends to claim that his action is done due to white supremacist brainwashing. He believes that he is doing it out of concern for his students,” *I sat here before going to the police station saying to myself that it was my duty, to my conscience, to you, to the whole community to do whatever I could to put*

*an end to this madness of boycotts and arson*.”

Mr. M becomes a traitor in the eyes of his own students and his people, a treason which makes him pay the price dearly in the form of execution.

Mr. M represents a group of blacks who prefer words over resistance. Mr. M says, before the debate starts, “*Shouting down the opposition so that they can’t be heard doesn’t comply with that definition. Enthusiasm for your cause is most commendable but without personal discipline it is as useless as having a good donkey and a good cart but no harness*.”

Mr. M can be seen as Fugard’s mouthpiece and his visionary character who advocates dialogue and discussion among people in South Africa. He seems to represent an approach to struggle which is that both blacks and whites should sit together where they can build a future based on dialogue, mutual respect, racial equality and human dignity after long years of violence, ethnic cleansing and discrimination. Mr. M’s approach is reinforced when he says after the debate, “*In my humble opinion they are the real winners this afternoon. You two just had to talk and argue*.”

At the final part of the play, we find that Thami and his revolutionary comrades replace the authority of Mr. M, whose most treasured possession is his English dictionary, with a new authority of resistance and discipline. Thami says, “*The struggle doesn’t need the big English words you taught me how to spell*”, to which Mr. M rebuts, “*Stones and petrol bombs can’t get inside those armoured cars. Words can*.” In their final confrontation, Mr. M retorts by offering his English dictionary to Thami who, in turn, rejects it: “*Be careful Thami. Be careful! Be careful! Don't scorn words. They are sacred! Magical! Yes, they are. Do you know that without words a man can't think? Yes, it's true. Take that thought back with you as a present from the despised Mr. M and share it with the Comrades. Tell them the difference between a man and an animal is that Man thinks, and he thinks with words.*”

Just before his murder, Mr. M stands in his schoolroom holding his dictionary in one hand and a rock that has been thrown at his window on the other. In fact, such scene reflects that there is a huge debate about the appropriate approach of resistance to be taken. Thami believes only in armed struggle to regain his own people’s rights while Mr. M represents the

Gandhian style that opts for non-violent means. He believes in the power of dialogue and communication to solve one’s differences. Mr. M’s speech continues,” *If the struggle needs weapons give it words Thami. Stones and petrol bombs can't get inside those armoured cars. Words can. They can do something even more devastating than that . . . they can get inside the heads of those inside the armoured cars. I speak to you like this because if I have faith in anything, it is faith in the power of the word. Like my master, the great Confucius, I believe that, using only words, a man can right a wrong and judge and execute the wrongdoer. You are meant to use words like that.*”

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Mr. M’s speech may reflect Athol Fugard’s vision that only dialogue and words which should happen between human beings. Fugard’s liberal vision isa true reflection of the way he chooses to conclude his play with meaningful messages when Isabel and Thami take stock of what Mr. M stood for. Thami decides to go north and uses his mind to become a strategist for the black rights movement instead of remaining a member of the mindless mob. Isabel ends the play as one of Mr. M’s children whose new role will be to work from within society for a social change and reform. She goes to Wapadsberg Pass, where Mr. M has his first vision of what dialogue could do “*The future is ours Isabel. We shall show this stupid country how it is done.*” Isabel assures him that his children can still save South Africa by saying back at the end of the play “*I am going to try my best to make my life useful in the way yours was. I want you to be proud of me. After all,I am one of your children you know .You did welcome me to your family .The future is still ours, Mr. M*.”

**ISABEL**

A self-described rebel in the family, with opinions of her own, Isabel comes forth for much of the play as self-directed, quick to express those opinions, and ready to consider others ‘beliefs while holding steadfastly to hers. A third-generation sober, sensible, English-speaking South African, she embraces the liberal ideals of slow, steady resistance and progress through education and cooperation. The debate with Thami becomes a realisation for Isabel that the blacks had no intention of being grateful, leaving her feeling exposed. Until she goes to Thami‘s school for the debate, she admits that the black location was, in her words, on the edge of my life, the way it is out there on the edge of town. The debate becomes her discovery, a lesson about all the locations in the country, of how little she knows and how much she can learn. That experience and that discovery become so exciting. When Mr. M proposes the team competition, she is quick to agree with him that Knowledge has banished fear and she and he are kindred spirits.

Once she senses the tension between Mr. M and Thami and in the location, she tries to understand her peer, yet she seems never to grasp how the political is more important than the personal, something liberals warned others to avoid. Instead of being friends with Thami, she attempts to take the role many South African liberals adopted, namely that of a mediator, negotiator, and conciliator. Isabel fails to understand Thami‘s decision as he chooses what he feels is right over personal relationships and any personal gains he might have enjoyed as diligent, smart, and elite student. With her liberal bias, she never appreciates that he chooses the political over the personal. When Thami explains that Mr. M has chosen to identify himself with an education system that the Comrades believe maintains apartheid, Isabel advises that he does not allow that to interfere with his relationship with Mr. M because something going wrong between the two of them is just about the worst thing [she can] imagine. We all need each other - Before the scene ends, she harangues Thami about friendship, If we can‘t be open and honest with each other and say what is in our hearts, we‘ve got no right to use [the word friendship]. Again, Isabel assumes the role of advisor expressing the liberal preference for the personal over the political.

In Act II, when Thami decides that he must resign from the competition, as it symbolizes cooperation with whites, Isabel then lectures him on the definition of freedom:

*Other people deciding who can and who can‘t be your friends, what you must do and what you can‘t do. Is this the Freedom you‘ve been talking to me about? That you were going to fight for?*

In their last exchange, after the death of Mr. M, Isabel confronts Thami, demanding an

explanation of what she considers a murder, the madness [that] drove those people to kill a man who had devoted his whole life to helping them, a man she describes as a good person and one of the most beautiful beings [she has] ever known. Despite Thami‘s efforts, Isabel does not understand and seemingly rejects his explanation. Instead of listening, she argues, at times intensely, that Mr. M acted as a matter of conscience; that a mad mob murdered *one unarmed defenceless man, and his death was so wrong! So stupid! for the entire country needed him*. Here, she expresses the outrage and fear many liberals felt about black

activists‘ retribution against collaborators, viewing it as harmful, senseless, and unruly violence against good people.

Isabel can only promise to Thami that she will try to understand all that has happened,

especially the death of Mr. M and her friend‘s decision to go north. Fugard gives the last

monologue to her; it seems to suggest that she mourns Mr. M‘s death still as a murder, another wasted life lost to the madness, the irrational chaos, the ugliness, and the stupidity, all the labels liberals used to describe the results of the black activism of the 1980s. Despite the death of Mr. M and the loss of Thami to fighters in the north, She restates an enduring faith the liberal hope that rational people collaborating can and will reform South Africa. From that faith, Isabel vows to Mr. M to make her life useful in the way she feels he was. In short, despite all that happens in the play, Mr. M‘s fear about South Africa arriving too late and Thami‘s resigned, mournful admission that the most terrible words in English are too late, Isabel assures Mr. M and the audience that hope exists for South Africa presumably when Mr. M‘s prediction that when the boycott comes to an inglorious end like all the others, the liberal ideals dismissed as old-fashioned will prevail.

Apart from the school debate in the opening scene, the entire play focuses on the predicaments of blacks, the yawning inequalities and disparities in the educational system and other opportunities afforded the different races in that society. The issues addressed in the play become more serious when the white girl, Isabel, affirms the injustice done to the blacks, as she recollects:

*I can remember one visit, just in the car and staring out of the window trying to imagine what it would be like to live my whole life in one of those little pondoks. No electricity, no running water. No privacy. Auntie‘s little house has only got two small rooms and nine of them sleep there. I ended up being damn glad I was born with a white skin.*

Again, Isabel‘s disgust at the poverty of the environment where her fellow students who are unfortunate‖ to be blacks are kept is also revealed in her allusion to her first visit to the black school:

*They were waiting for us in what they called Number One Classroom. Honestly, I would rate it is as the most bleak, depressing, dingy classroom I have ever been in. Everything about it was grey–the cement floor, the walls, the ceiling. When I first saw it I thought to myself, how in God‘s name does anybody study or learn anything in here.*

**Mr M**

In Mr. M Isabel finds a kindred spirit, for while he may describe himself as a black

Confucian, he seems as liberal as Isabel. Fugard‘s Mr. M embodies many of the qualities of black teachers activists were quick to consider as working to secure apartheid. Mr. M maintains respect for authority, right authority, is deeply ingrained in the African soul. Mr. M assumes that, as his favourite student, Thami trusts his judgment of what is best. In their serious discussion about politics, Mr. M cuts him off sternly; refusing to entertain the young man‘s views, Mr. M says, *If you want to do something revolutionary for me let us sit down and discuss it, because I have a few constructive alternatives I would like to suggest*. Moments later, and without conferring with Thami, Mr. M enthusiastically accepts Isabel‘s invitation for tea at her parents‘ home as a pleasure and a privilege. Her invitation and his gracious acceptance are revealing. Afternoon tea had by that time become politically significant in South Africa; Biko specifically points to tea at white homes as a symbol of how liberals patronize intelligent blacks. In Act II, frustrated and fearful by Thami‘s hardening stance, he exclaims *I will ask you all the questions I like . . . Because I am a man and you are a boy*. Convinced in that right authority, Mr. M fails to appreciate the changes in the township, especially the new attitudes about education. He ardently believes that his favourite student Thami must remain in school; as he explains to Isabel, he feels that his responsibility is to make sure that Thami becomes the real leader as powerful forces are fighting for the souls of young people. Thami is what his generation needs, a real leader and not a rabble-rouser. He embodies the prevalent liberal attitudes towards the township riots. Education is a means for stability, and the equal footing that black leaders demand comes through education. He holds on the classroom as a space for hope, and for him, anything outside of it is chaos. Whites can and will empathize with blacks as Isabel symbolizes, and for this reason, Thami must work in the system, go to a university, to become a real leader. Even during the riots, Mr. M desperate to do something and stop the madness can only think to return to his schoolroom, imaging that ringing his school bell wildly will turn his students away from chaotic violence in the streets and back to the rationality of the school building.

Mr. M sees the literary competition as an opportunity for Thami to fulfil his future role and to demonstrate positive race mixing; if the two students win (as Isabel assures Mr. M they will), he will demand a full university scholarship for Thami. Moreover, on a symbolic level

Thami and Isabel‘s cooperation and subsequent victory, Mr. M believes, will represent to their country how blacks and whites can work together to achieve a goal. He first imagined them as a team after their debate, when they so skilfully engaged him and thought: They shouldn't be fighting each other. They should be fighting together! If the sight of them as opponents is so exciting, imagine what it would be like if they were allies. If those two stood side by side and joined forces, they could take on anybody and win. His fears that Thami‘s education will be wasted drive Mr. M‘s ambition for the literary competition, for he worries that Isabel and Thami will be another two victims of this country‘s lunacy. His answer is cooperation and education. Mr. M fully embraces the educational system because for him it offers the best opportunity for Thami and the other special students to forge a society based on cooperation. As Mr. M explains in one of his monologues, he keeps the savage animal Hope alive by feeding it his young people, and explains that is why he teaches. Thus, the literary competition means so much to Mr. M because it will reward his special student – his favourite, for whom he has waited, that one eager and gifted young head into which he can pour all that he knows and loves and who will justify all the years of frustration in the classroom. When Isabel agrees to join the competition, Mr. M tells her, “*The future is ours Isabel. We‘ll show this stupid country how it is done.”*

Mr. M refuses to act, for that means changing the system he embraces. When Thami confronts him with his willingness to teach in the system, Mr. M argues that he has educated his students by working within the system. Nevertheless, his fears of lawless violence and his hope for black assimilation reveal his doubts about blacks. He believes that the only consequence of the boycott is chaos, and if Thami joins, he is lost. It cannot lead to change, i.e., freedom for blacks. In their final exchange, moments before he is killed, Mr. M tells Thami why he fears the boycott. He describes an image he saw on television:

*An Ethiopian tribesman, and he was carrying the body of a little child that had died of hunger in*

*the famine. . .a small bundle carelessly warped in a few rags. . . .*

*He held that little bundle very lightly as he shuffled along to a mass grave, and when he reached*

*it, he didn‘t have the strength to kneel and lay it down*

*gently. . . . He just opened his arms and let it fall. . . .*

*The tribesman and dead child do duty for all Thami. Every African soul is either carrying that*

*bundle or in it.*

The Ethiopian famine resulted from civil wars as factions struggled for power and Mr. M fears that change can only lead to a similar situation, a world that wastes his children and his Africa. The infant the tribesman carries represents a wasted future; the tribesman a generation holding only death and slowing starving. To Mr. M change threatens to make mockery of all [his] visions of splendour he once found in Africa.

Instead Mr. M hopes for integration, but he implies throughout the play that blacks must prove themselves to whites, and he sees Thami as his ―project‖ to show whites and perhaps blacks that blacks can succeed in the white world. Mr. M does not realize, however, that to the young protesters Thami‘s success, for example in the literary competition, would only demonstrate his assimilation into the white world. The students believe, as Biko argues, that by continually having to prove themselves to whites –by assimilating to an established set of norms and code of behaviour set by and maintained by whites, blacks do not force integration but merely uphold a superior-inferior white-black stratification. As a teacher in the Bantu education system, Mr. M can only hope to create a black elite that can enjoy some rewards under apartheid, yet despite his faith that using only words, a man can right a wrong and judge and execute the wrongdoer‖ and that Thami has the potential to be a leader, as long as skin pigmentation remains the basis for white racism, whites can never consider blacks as equal.

**THAMI**

If Fugard intends Isabel and Mr. M to represent liberal values, then he wants Thami to represent the consequences of rejecting liberal values for polarization. BC ideology is a threat, as it distracts elite blacks like Thami from sure if slow progress that liberalism assures, a distraction that only brings about confusion and thus violence, lawlessness, and loss as it had in the 1970s. Apartheid is not the cause; black rejection of liberalism is. Fugard‘s sincere intent is to end apartheid, yet his play presents the emergent black activism as a danger.

As a youngster, Thami loved school; he remembers in his long monologue that his school

reports describe him as a most particularly promising pupil. Eager and bright, Thami excelled, and he wanted to become a medical doctor to help his people. Yet now his praiseworthy ambition has unfortunately died, after he concludes that what causes most of [the suffering of his people] is not an illness that can be cured by the pills and bottles of medicine they hand out at the clinic. He recognizes that apartheid causes their sufferings, and he sees as well that education and the future provide only individual fulfilment for bright young blacks in South Africa. Thami‘s unselfishness led him to want to be a doctor, but now that unselfishness makes him see that the rewards of Bantu education are available – to a limited degree –only to a handful of blacks, the elite. Thami loses his ambition to excel in the institutions defined by apartheid for those institutions are open to a select few, and he could find no satisfaction as a doctor. He will not participate in this system that allows restricted and unequal integration for a few elite blacks.

His education and achievements in the white world would benefit only him, but at the same time he could never be equal to whites, only superior to most blacks. He decides that personal ambition and achievement of young intelligent blacks do not lead to true integration, but only a mock integration built on the suffering of the majority of blacks. Fugard has Thami express the African communalism associated with the BCM. The African belief that personhood must be earned by participating in communal endeavours helps to explain Thami‘s decision to reject education and join the boycott. During one of their practice sessions for the literary competition, Thami assures Isabel that Africans won‘t leave it to Time to bring down oppressive cultures. Mr. M breaks in, and he and Thami confront each other:

*Mr. M: Who is the we you speak of with such authority Thami?*

*Thami: The People.*

*Mr. M: Yes, yes, yes, of course . . . I should have known. ―The People . . . with a capital P.*

*Does that include me? Am I one of ―The People?*

*Thami: If you choose to be.*

*Mr. M: I‘ve got to choose have I. My black skin doesn‘t confer automatic membership. So how do I go about choosing?*

*Thami: By identifying with the fight for our Freedom.*

Mr. M expresses the basic premise of white racism – that skin colour is the measure of human beings. He questions Thami‘s argument that one must identify with the fight for freedom by implying that his black skin should include him. In other words Mr. M claims that since he is not white, he wants what blacks want. Yet Thami counters with the argument that if he wants what blacks want, he must act. And for the good of the community, Thami willingly forsakes what personal achievements he might enjoy from apartheid. He argues that his people must oppose acculturation:

*We have woken up at last. We have found another school--the streets, the little rooms, the funeral parlors of the location--anywhere the people meet and whisper names we have been told to forget, the dates of events they try to tell us never happened, and the speeches they try to say were never made. Those are the lessons we are eager and proud to learn, because they are lessons about our history, about our heroes.*

Thami comes to see Bantu education not as an opportunity but as a form of control that imposes white culture on blacks, and he denounces the classrooms as ―traps which have been carefully set to catch the minds and souls of South Africa‘s young black elite.

Thami also comes to reject the liberal faith in the future. He reconsidered the rewards of education when he listened to a speech by the Inspector of Bantu Schools who tells Thami and his classmates:

*You are special! You are the elite! We have educated you because we want you to be major shareholders in the future of this wonderful Republic of ours. In fact, we want all the peoples of South Africa to share in that future.*

Thami cannot reconcile the ideals of Bantu education with the reality he finds in the township; when the inspector continually mentions the future, Thami is no longer the inspired student he was:

*my head was trying to deal with that one word: the Future! He kept using it . . . our future, the country‘s future, a wonderful future of peace and prosperity. What does he really mean,*

*I kept asking myself. Why does my heart go hard and tight as a stone when he says it? I look around me in the location at the men and women who went out into that wonderful future before me. What do I see? Happy and contented shareholders in this exciting enterprise called the Republic of South Africa?*

Striving to understand his country and its ties to European ideology, Thami questions the faith in the future whereas Mr. M seems liberal. While the traditional African view looks to the past, the European view is to the future. For this reason, African time moves backward‘ rather than forward‘ and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place. Unable to look past the present situation in South Africa and towards the future, Thami embraces the African conception of time, with its emphasis on the present as actual time and its disbelief in the future as potential time. Fugard has Thami grow angrier for much of the second part of the play after being gracious and friendly before. The young student in particular resents his teacher‘s assurance of right authority. In his first exchange with Isabel, he reports, I changed. Things changed. Everything‘s changed. When Mr. M exits, Thami explains to Isabel that his teacher is out of touch with what is really happening to us blacks and the way we feel about things. . . . His ideas about change are the old-fashioned ones. Thami has come to embrace the ideology of the BCM, rejecting liberal faith in the future and individual achievement, and Fugard suggests that the activism has distracted a promising and bright young black man.

For much of the play Fugard has Thami voice the beliefs many black activists expressed at the time, yet after Mr. M is necklaced, Thami regrets what has happened. In his confrontation with Isabel, Thami admits feeling that he is ―too late. He regrets not expressing his love for his teacher and not attempting to explain the boycott to Mr. M. He says to her, *I‘ll never forgive myself for not trying harder with him and letting him know ... my true feelings for him. Right until the end I tried to deny it. . .to him, to myself*. Thami‘s moment of recognition that he is too late, an echo of Mr. M‘s anxiety about South Africa, is a warning of the consequences of the emergent activism: blacks like Thami will realize that the violence and the loss arising from black activism only hurt blacks.

True to the beliefs held by the majority of liberals in South Africa in the 1980s, Fugard envisions only one possible consequence of the school boycotts. Saying that the play wasbetween me and my country. Fugard wants it to be a tragedy, a lesson about the rejection of progressive liberalism: whites should be like Isabel, and blacks should be like Mr. M, not like Thami. Its overt political argument is that blacks must understand that black activism must lead only to violence. The tragedy mostly arises when Thami realizes that he is too late to stop the consequences that led to the death of Mr. M If the play has a villain, it is BC ideology as Fugard and other liberals of the time misunderstood it – a threat that distracts elite blacks from the sure if slow progress that liberalism assures and as a danger that only brings about polarization which in turns brings about confusion and chaotic violence and loss. Fugard‘s sincere intent to call for the end of apartheid, and Isabel‘s final assertion that the future is still hopeful suggests that the end is near, for Isabel seemingly comforts the audience that the emergent black activism is indeed dangerous yet short-lived.